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ABSTRACT

In fall 1991 and spring 1992, an interdisciplinary art-and-writing collaborative project was initiated by an English instructor at Yakima Valley Community College (YVCC) and a graphics instructor at Everett Community College (ECC), both in Washington State. The project involved a graphics art class at ECC and a writing class from YVCC, pairing each art student with a "writing partner" and each writing student with an "art partner." Compositions produced by the writing students were distributed to the art students who responded by creating a piece of artwork inspired by the writing. The writing students then examined the artwork produced from their writing, and completed a written response to the piece. In the fall quarter, the writing students produced a variety of compositions, including poetry, short stories, and narratives, and the art students were asked to respond to the "mood" expressed by the writing. In the spring quarter, the writing students were required to write profiles of people who were important to them, while the art students were asked to respond using "found images" which could be blended together to illustrate the written profiles. Students in the writing class viewed the artwork as a group before being told which one corresponded to their writing. These classroom sessions were videotaped, as were discussions in the art class. The project helped writing students to become attentive to the role of perception, meaning-making, and audience response in the writing process. The bulk of the paper consists of excerpts of the writing students' comments about the artwork that was produced in response to their writing. (PAA)

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Meaning-Making Through Writing and Art Collaboration

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May 25, 1992

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MEANING-MAKING THROUGH WRITING AND ART COLLABORATION

The Yakima Valley and Everett Community Colleges art-and-writing collaboration project began after a conversation between graphics teacher Greg Kammer and myself in which we discussed the importance of coordinated studies and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching. During the conversation we decided it would be interesting to try to collaborate. We decided that I would send my students' writing to him, that he would distribute the writing among his students and that they would respond by creating pieces of art suggested by the writing. Each of my students would have, therefore, an "art partner," and each of his students would have a "writing partner."

We videotaped discussions at both ends of the project. Greg's students responded to the experience of creating artwork based on another person's writing, and my students responded to the artwork they had received based on their writing. My students gave both an oral response in the classroom and a written response as part of the assignment. Greg's students responded orally both quarters.

We used the project fall quarter, 1991, and winter quarter, 1992, with some success. Both of us noted, primarily, that students overall *enjoyed* the experience. It gave my writing students the chance to experience an invisible and distant audience and to be exposed to the effect interpretation can have on understanding a piece of writing. My students got to see their writing disappear into "space," then be returned with a tangible response, something they could agree with, enjoy, or be disappointed by, and through which they could learn an understanding of audience and meaning-making. Greg's students got the chance to work in a setting in which they had the "power" to recreate the writer's world. Greg said they liked being in the position of authority and liked the idea of responding visually to the work of an unknown writer. In such a situation they could be honest about their responses and not worry about hurting someone's feelings.

It's important to note that the "rules" of the project were fluid. It was totally experimental, and we found ourselves with a fascinating variety of responses from students. And the project itself changed between the two quarters. In fall quarter, my students wrote whatever they chose — poetry, short stories, narratives, "visions," whatever struck their fancy. The writing ranged from excellent to barely adequate. It included bad poetry (yet powerful within the students'

own minds because it expressed what they were feeling), amusing short stories, moving real-life experiences, and powerful expressions of "self." Greg's students were asked to respond to the "mood" expressed by the writing and were given the chance to be fairly creative. Their work ranged, he said, from the excellent to the more mundane, as often they were limited by their lack of skill or knowledge of computer techniques. But the students were, for the most part, honest in their interpretations.

In winter quarter, we changed the assignments. I asked my students to write profiles of people in some way important to them. Greg asked his students to respond using "found images": that is, they needed to find illustrations outside or on their computers and blend them together to illustrate the stories. He wanted students to use their technical knowledge of the computer programs to find and modify their illustrations. He also cautioned them to avoid the obvious, to illustrate the "essence" rather than the reality of the story, or to become a collaborator, as he said. Thus the "rules" of the project were a little less free, a little less open to creative interpretation, and a little more defined.

Before my students sent off their work, they spent time as artists, creating their own images of what their writing meant to them. After Greg's students had responded to the writing, I put the illustrations on a screen without identifying the pieces of writing they were supposed to illustrate. Students could either immediately identify their pieces, because they captured some concrete description in the writing or subtly expressed a mood the students were trying to communicate, or else they were unable to identify the artwork as "belonging" to them. The discussion was lively and excited. Students strained to see the prints, and eagerly responded to what they saw on the screen. Some were disappointed, but most of them realized the importance of "creating a picture" in the reader's mind.

On the whole, those whose writing was abstract received pictures they couldn't immediately identify. One woman, Lori, wrote a poem called "The Dream." The writing was abstract, with few images. The artist responded by creating a picture in which a woman cradled a small baby. The light was somber, and the woman stood in a dark street that receded from her and was lined with what looked like old and solemn buildings. Lori didn't claim the picture. When I noted it was hers, she said, "But I didn't say anything about a baby. Where would the person get that?" When she looked at the poem again, she acknowledged that it lacked any concrete imagery that would tie it to a meaning closer to her own. In her response, she wrote, "The piece where the woman was holding the child really interested me, because I never said anything about a baby. The artist brought that out of my poem by herself."

Lori's response was common among those whose illustrations did not match their vision of their intended meanings. She recognized a discrepancy between her own vision of her poem and the artist's view. And she understood that the discrepancy had to to with meaning-making. In class she noted that she could have been more visual and that perhaps then the artist would have seen something more like her own vision. Lori, an average student who works hard but has problems synthesizing ideas, learned mainly that her view and the artist's were different because another person can read something that isn't *apparently* there into a piece of work, and because details are important to create a picture for the audience. If the writer does not provide enough details to make meaning, the reader out of necessity provides his or her own details to finish the picture. The writer does not control the meaning-making; the reader does.

Lori's response to her "Dream" poem artwork was echoed by other students in the class. They, like her, realized the differences in vision between their own understanding of their writing, and the artists' understanding. And they understood that those differences came in part from their own lack of detail in writing (and unawareness of audience), and in part from the meaning-making process that determines how experience will shape our understanding of a situation.

The following responses illustrate the students' understanding, after the project, of the importance of detail and the role interpretation plays in meaning-making:

> "I would recommend that any (writer) be thoroughly specific, so the artist can visualize a person's physical characteristics or personality by what the writer is trying to express."
>
> **— Sarai.**

> "If it doesn't come out the way I expect, it is not (because) the artist's wrong. It is because different people get different impressions on the same thing. Also, maybe I didn't put enough information about her in my paper. Then the artist can only draw the picture according to the limited information from my paper."
>
> **— May Lee: An exchange student from China.**

> "The artwork in itself was done nicely. However, it did not portray Brooke Creswell in the way I imagined . . . I did not mention women at all, and yet the woman was a main part of the illustration. Perhaps the name 'Brooke' confused the artist into believing my subject was woman."

— Stacie

While most students were pleased — if occasionally puzzled — by the artists' interpretation of their writing, a few were disappointed:

> "I was disappointed . . . in the response, but don't feel that the artist was wrong in responding the way he/she did. I also don't believe that it was a reflection on my writing, but instead a reflection on the way the artist's mind perceived what I wrote."

— Desiree

In a project that requires student dedication, there is always the risk that certain students won't take the project seriously or that a good writer whose work is graphic and clear will be disappointed, as Desiree was. But here the project allows students to realize the inconsistencies they will encounter once they leave college. Desiree was serious about her writing and about her piece on a determined, talented, compassionate artist. Her writing was clear and specific, and she expected a serious illustration that would reflect her tone. The illustration disappointed her because it was "childlike." It featured the top of a person's head with a bubble rising into the air. The bubble contained three pieces of artwork presented rather like postcards. They were simplistic, in primary colors. Desiree was upset because they didn't match the tone of her piece or the intentions behind it. But such a picture gives the instructor a chance to talk about levels of achievement and the necessity of learning to trust in oneself. After all, Greg's artists struggle with the same problems in creating an artistic illustrations as my students struggle with in creating a verbal illustration. And they too may not have either the skills or the inclination to do a powerful job. So Desiree learned not that her writing was inadequate but that her "audience" was not ready for it. "I believe my paper was pretty graphic," she wrote. "And yet I still did not get what I expected as a response."

Greg mentions the artist was disappointed because he wanted to know what kind of art the woman was interested in. Desiree did not clearly express her friend's interests, largely because she is not familiar with different artistic media. She concentrated instead on the woman's struggle to achieve her dream to be an artist. It is a pity we have not yet found a way for the writers and artists to communicate so they can express their questions and frustrations. Had Desiree realized the direction of the artist's interest, and his rationale for his response, she may have understood more what led him to create a picture she deemed childish.

It's also important to note that the students were writing "blind" or to an unknown audience. Since they didn't know anything about their audience except that its members were community college students interested in art, it would have been more difficult for them to "predict" a response. Professional writers would know to write to a general audience, but even then they may inadvertently disappoint or confuse some members of that audience.

The project gave students a chance not only to realize what *they* could do to create a picture in someone else's head, but also to realize that we all bring our own experiences to interpretation, and those experiences can change the way we read a book, look at a picture, or interpret our lives around us. Kari, a young man whose story about an old man's lonely existence was carefully written, realized the importance of other interpretations in his written response:

> The first portrait went deep into my story. That is OK because people interpret stories different. The artist used color to show the feelings of John, the old man. The dark border showed a feeling of unhappiness and loneliness while the narrow white light showed a feeling of pleasant things ahead. The artist used the black crow as a sort of doom that is hanging over John as if he did not have much longer to live. But as he sees the light his spirits rise and he now sees that he does have something to live for . . . Sam (the crow) had much emphasis placed on him and when I wrote the story Sam (was) just a friend that kept the old man happy. Sam is not a symbol of doom or disaster but a friendly person to keep John company. But I see how the artist could have grasped that idea (of doom), so they are not wrong for thinking that.

Marcella, who wrote an often-revised poem about an eagle reincarnated as a human, was fascinated by the artistic response. The poem was an off-shoot from an in-class writing: "In my past life I was . . ." She wrote, first, a poem about an eagle that was shot. The poem was thinly detailed and at times trite. With a little prompting from group members, she became more visual, and was delighted with the final product, which she said was the first poem she had ever revised: "I usually just write them and they're OK, but this took a lot of work, and it really is better." Her written response to the artwork showed a growth of awareness of audience and the importance of learning from others in the writing process:

> The picture drawn for my poem "In my past life I was . . . " is a beautiful portrayal of this piece of writing. Almost every element described in the poem is used in the picture: the tall buildings crowded together in the cities; the closely-knit groups of people, always hard at work; the eagle soaring through the sky, with the sun overhead and the

> desert below; and one element which has been added to slightly — the young woman staring out the window at the eagles flying overhead. This last element portrays a feeling of sorrow and loneliness — the feeling that something is missing in the young woman's life. The artist has done a wonderful job capturing the main point of this piece of writing, as well as the emotional aspect. This is exactly the response I was hoping for but could not picture in my own mind *without the help of another.* (Italics mine.)

Marcella recognized the importance of other people in the writer's world. We can use others to help us visualize, to help us understand, to help us realize the truth of our own writing. The project was a success for her because her writing was visual, the artist captured the world she portrayed, and she learned something in return. He helped her clarify her intentions for her writing. Perhaps now she will turn to others for help when she writes — whatever the purpose of the writing — and will learn by their input.

The project seems to work on different levels, depending on the student. Some students, like Lori, start out believing in the sanctity of their own opinions, their own writing. While the project doesn't miraculously shift their understanding towards an awareness of differences and the need to balance their own deepest beliefs with an openness for new learning, they do shift towards viewing the illustrations at least partly as a result of meaning-making and interpretation. They also understand, at a basic level, that their own writing can affect the meaning-making somewhat: "Lori needed more details, so the artist could see it," as Renee put it.

Students who have come to recognize the value of different visions, like Marcella, become aware of the importance of others in writing. Writing is not a solitary activity. And if we write for another, we must take that other's understanding into consideration if we wish to communicate on a similar level.

And others come to see, *specifically,* how the artist's perception has been shaped by their own words. They become aware, perhaps clearly for the first time, of the importance of considering audience.

Euticio wrote about a friend who is the director of a local fruit company:

> In my profile writing, I tried to capture more than the physical description of Kent, but also the personality . . . (In) the graphic art illustration . . . the physical aspects are justifiable, but the dimension of his personality did not exist. The illustration could

> represent any businessman . . . I believe that the artist was right in his or her representation due to error on my part. The interviewing process involves the interviewer as the focal point of synthesis. I did not give justice to Kent by only giving a choppy description of a well-rounded individual . . . The description of an individual required specific as well as vivid writing. The creation of a character needs to have life. The process of writing is much like taking pictures. You are the camera . . . You control the pictures that you want to take.

Dennis wrote about a Buddhist friend. His first drafts were unfocused and seemed split between two subjects: his friend, Mr. McGough; and the concept of cause-and-effect that permeates the Buddhist religion. The split became apparent in the artist's response. As Dennis wrote, "I would expect the artist to respond to the description of Mr. McGough, a cautious coyote with a powerful body and a well-worn face." But the artist chose to illustrate what Dennis saw as the "meaning" behind the essay:

> It has him standing on the tip of the roof and fighting to keep his balance. Symbolizing that in life, if we make good causes, we will not fall but if we make bad causes, no matter how much good fortune we have, we will fall. The light around him seems to hold him in the air so he won't fall. This light symbolizes that faith, practice and sharing will hold one from falling.

Dennis had intended the essay to be exclusively about Mr. McGough. He saw, after he observed the artist's illustration, that the split had made the reader focus more on the "cause-and-effect" aspect of Buddhism than on Mr. McGough himself, and he recognized his lack of direction: "I still need to write with more focus." But he was pleased because although the artist had focused on an unexpected aspect of his writing, she had picked out what he saw as the "hidden meaning," or what truly interested him about Buddhism. His rewrite, offered spontaneously as a result of the project, took care of the lack of focus he had perceived, not because of my prompting but because of the artist's response.

Mark's paper about a Catholic priest resulted in shock when he saw the illustration. He had wanted to focus on the personality of his subject, but his reader's apparent pre-conceived notions of Catholicism created what Mark saw as a stereotype in the illustration:

> I saw Mike as the type of person who was more at home on a mountain trail hiking. In my mind that is the scene I thought would stand out. I realize now that I placed very little emphasis on Mike's hobby, and a greater emphasis on Mike's ministry work.

> I recognized my work immediately, a gold sunburst overlaid with lines radiating from the center, and overlaid once more with the bust of a saint taken from a stained glass window. My initial reaction to the artist's rendition of my work was a feeling of defensiveness. I felt the general public had a bias towards the Catholic Church. A bias that (makes) most people think of stained glass and Gothic cathedrals when they think of Catholicism.
>
> I was expecting a bias from the artist because I encounter biases so often with people outside the church. At the time (I first saw the illustration) I did not realize I was prejudiced by my own bias. It was not until later that day I realized this might have been a sincere rendition of my interview with Mike. The stained glass used by the artist may have been an image of St. Michael the Archangel. In the opening scene of my paper I described Mike greeting people after daily Mass; I realize now how important first impressions are, and the ability we have as writers to blind our audience, leaving them unable to see the point we are trying to make.
>
> We, the audience, carry with us our hopes, our fears, and our own agenda that we faithfully try to promote. We the audience have a tendency to see what we want to see.
>
> The project has given me a clearer understanding of how people interpret their surroundings . . . The advice I would give to some one writing for an artist is, avoid vagueness. The artist has only the material you give him and his background knowledge to draw from. What the writer fails to put in, the illustrator will make up. Avoid words and phrases that could mislead the illustrator away from your main point. Keep in mind that you will be dealing with human frailties such as bias, yours and the illustrators.

In a class of writing students, the majority are there because they have to be: the class is required; they must "survive" it to go on; they have no faith in their own abilities. A few, like the following student, enjoy writing and have used it for years as catharsis or self-help. But simply because they enjoy writing doesn't mean they are aware of or care about audience. The project, as explained by Sherry, seems to help develop in them that awareness:

> Writing has always been, from my standpoint, a solitary activity. From childhood I have written, not for the edification or approval of any other person, but to satisfy a need in myself. I wrote for the simple joy of combining the written word into new and different patterns, the pleasure of expressing myself in a a way that was new to me.

> One of the most interesting aspects of the "Meaning-Making through Writing and Art Collaboration Project" was finding out how the artist perceived what I had written. Just as my writing was influenced by everything I had experienced up to the day the work was completed, so each artist brought his or her own viewpoint to the story. What the artist saw in the eye of the mind was influenced, not only by what I had written, but by what s/he lived.
>
> I feel sure that the quality of my writing has improved as a result of this project. Never again will I write in a vacuum, satisfied with the solitary experience. My writing will always possess a depth, some dimension it would not have had except for my awareness of the *reader* , that person who is not me, who has other experiences than mine, and who may be reading what I have written.
>
> In short, my writing is not a completely selfish pursuit undertaken particularly for my own pleasure, but a way to express myself with clarity for the pleasure of another person as well.

The project helped Sherry move from writer-based prose to reader-based prose and gave her a new outlet for her creativity.

As an English teacher, I'm constantly struggling to make writing relevant for my students. So often papers are written merely for the teacher, an imposing judge whose words stand as law. But when students get to write for someone else, an audience both distant and invisible, as all real-life writing audiences are, it changes their perceptions of writing: "It is a good project for any writer, because it keeps the writer wanting to continue to write, and to see what the outcome of his or her writing is," as Gabriel said. They learn about audience, because they have a tangible response to what they have written. They learn about perception and meaning-making, because artists, after all, have their own experience to bring to any situation, and will use that experience in interpreting life, a book, or a piece of writing by another student. And they learn about assessing their own work, about understanding the consequences of the words they use, the actions they take, and the way their writing communicates. But most of all, they have fun. And having fun makes writing relevant.

MEANING-MAKING THROUGH WRITING AND ART COLLABORATION

Procedure:

1. Writing partners write assigned pieces.

2. Writing partners revise writing.

3. Writing partners spend class period or overnight time creating artwork that reflects a key moment in their writing.
   Suggestion — They also could write a paragraph on why they chose that particular moment.

4. Instructor mails writing to collaborative college.

5. Art partners illustrate or "artistically respond to" writing partners' work.

6. Art instructor encourages students to discuss their reasons for the choices they made in illustrating the writing.
   Suggestion — It helps to videotape these sessions, or else to ask art partners to write responses, explaining the choices made in illustrating another person's writing.

7. Art instructor mails artwork back to writing instructor.

8. Writing instructor puts artwork on a screen without identifying the writing it reflects, and writing partners try to identify their own pieces based on elements they recognize. If they cannot recognize the piece as theirs, they discuss what may be the reasons.

9. Writing instructor asks students to respond in writing to a set of questions.
   Suggestion — If enough time is left in the quarter, writing partners might rewrite their papers based on the art partners' illustrative responses.

Art Response Questions:

Why did you pick the subject you wrote about?

What do you see as the climax, or illuminating moment, in your profile that you might expect an artist to respond to?

Why?

What is your response to the artwork?

Why?

Describe the artwork and what you see as being the most and the least powerful way it reflects your writing.

If it's not what you expect, what do you think the artist saw in your writing that would have led him or her to respond to it the way he or she did?

What conclusions have you come to based on the project?